EMBODIED LIVES

Reflections on the Influence of Suprapto Suryodarmo and Amerta Movement

Edited by: Katya Bloom, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve

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OPEN ACCESS

Acknowledgements and Introduction

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A Balinese Saying

Ilmu Padi (a lesson from the rice plant)

semakin tua semakin berisi, dan semakin merunduk
(the older, the fuller, and the more it bows)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The seed of an idea for this book sprouted in late 2011, and has followed an organic process of growing into the garden of shared experience that is *Embodied Lives*. This would not have happened without the involvement of an excellent team, especially the astonishing, dynamic and creative working relationship with my two co-editors, Margit Galanter and Sandra Reeve. Though our meetings all took place in the virtual space of Skype and, to date, they have not met each other face to face, we have flourished by digging together in the same rich soil. I am reminded of the traditional Native-American planting of the 'three sisters', the so-called 'companion plants' of corn, beans and squash that thrive so well in each other's company.

We want to offer heartfelt thanks to all the contributors for their enthusiasm and hard work in offering us their thoughtful writing, and their patience and responsiveness to the editorial process.

Special thanks to Beth Ahlstrand, Harry Blumenthal, Marc Galanter and Hugh Kelly, who gave generously of time, support and feedback, and to Diane Butler for her essential help with translations from Indonesian to English. We also want to thank Maxine Yalovitch-Blankenship for graciously giving us permission to use her artwork on the cover.

Our publisher Andrew Carey, and Michelle Smith and the team at Triarchy Press were wonderfully supportive and skillful, with just the right measure of hands-on guidance, with humility and humor.

And of course our deep gratitude to Prapto, whose work has inspired so many original and unique responses. Finally, as Prapto would surely add, a deep bow of thanks to Life.

KB

INTRODUCTION

The Javanese movement artist and teacher, Suprapto Suryodarmo (Prapto), and his Amerta Movement practice have had widespread influence on people from many cultures and professional backgrounds.

The common denominator for all of us who have had the good fortune to work with Prapto is the exploration of our own movement as a way of deepening our connection to ourselves, to each other and, at the same time, to our world.

The idea for *Embodied Lives* grew out of a wish to bring together reflections from many of us for whom Prapto's work has been transformational in supporting our own lives and work. We were interested in weaving together threads of writing from many practitioners, in the belief that the resulting collection would reveal some of the many different ways in which Amerta Movement has lived, grown and been integrated into their lives. Our intention is to both honour Prapto for his enormously valuable contribution, and to show how Amerta Movement has been, and continues to be, developed and embodied. This collection celebrates some of the fruits of the harvest over many years.

The Practice

Amerta Movement may be seen as cultivating an embodied approach to life through the practice of movement as a skilled art. It seems to reach beyond 'movement meditation' or 'dance' into a movement world that is uniquely sensitizing and integrative.

Amerta Movement differs from most other traditional movement arts, like Tai chi or Yoga, or somatic practices, like the Feldenkrais Method or Alexander Technique, because Amerta has no set form, no pre-existing patterns, or series of movements. There is nothing to follow except one's own experience on all levels, but especially the sensory-motoric – our bodies, on the Earth, and responsive to gravity.

Practitioners interact with both environment and self, while also being in communication with the personalities and cultural heritage of fellow movers. A relationship with the past also comes alive as part of the present. Amerta Movement, thus provides a forum for cultural, artistic, atmospheric, and human interaction. This breadth of the practice affects the quality of experience in the movement itself, as well as perceptions of the world in which we live.

We receive our connection inward and outward simultaneously. From this we follow the moment-by-moment decisions of our beings in time and space, as we follow our intention to deepen our embodied awareness of the ever-changing here and now. Our bodies listen and speak, choose and allow, as we encounter the border between known and unknown. With an attitude of attentive play, we discover meaning.

For most of our lives, after early childhood, our movement settles into and replicates a limited vocabulary of patterns, in which we use our bodies as tools to carry out our wishes and needs. In Amerta Movement, we regain a sense of our bodies as responsive, sensing organisms, and our vocabulary develops from that very different starting place. When we allow our bodies to 'speak' or express from that place, with ordinary, daily life movements and their variations – such as lying, rolling, crawling, sitting, walking, jumping – what arises is an enlivening experience, which Prapto calls *blossoming*. Prapto's image for the common field of practice, when a group moves together, is that of a garden, where each being is a unique expression of life, and where the micro and the macro levels of one's experience can connect.

The nature of the practice is that we slow things down, relaxing both body and mind. With roots in Vipassana (mindfulness) meditation, daily life movement, non-stylized movement and a Javanese meditation form called Sumarah, the practice helps us to open our senses, to receive what is present and, crucially, to recognize that the present is always changing. The Buddhist principle of non-attachment is central to the Amerta practice, though we are more actively involved in witnessing what comes and goes than we would be in traditional meditation. In this way we discover different points of view, different ways of moving, listening and speaking with our bodies.

There are many movement themes which guide practitioners in this process of change in body/time/space, and support our own ability to move with clarity, comfort and a sense of safety. A wide

variety of these are brought to life in a range of different contexts by the contributors to this book.

Prapto is skilled at creating an atmosphere of openness and dialogue, so that each participant can be seen and can recognize their own unique qualities. We have always been asked to interpret his work through our own experience, and to learn, not only from Prapto, but also from each other. He has insisted that he studies from each of us, as much as we study with him.

The stated aim is *sharing movement*. This approach has given value to each person, as it instils a sense of responsibility. This originates, in part, from giving value to the changing body in a changing environment. The emphasis on change means that even the practice itself isn't fixed. We are part of a live, embodied, evolving community of practice.

Time to Harvest

The Balinese word *biukukung* is the name for the ritual offering made by farmers when the rice stalks are full of grain and bowing over, ready to be harvested. The expression is also seen as a metaphor for life – as we grow older and fill with wisdom, we share what we have learned from our many years of experience. *Biukukung* is sometimes translated as blossoming.

This book is a response to the feeling that the time was ripe for a harvest of mature reflections blossoming from some of those who have integrated the practice of Amerta Movement into their work/lives over time. We sent a call to all the dialoguers[1] in the worldwide 'circulation' of Amerta Movement. In answer to the call we gathered these thirty responses from people in fourteen countries. Each of the writers has made the work their own, each with different questions to investigate. As well as illustrating the variety of ways Amerta Movement has been applied, their contributions together uncover the common ground we share – the 'unity in diversity' – a defining principle of the practice.

The writing that comprises *Embodied Lives* is as individual as the people writing, as individual as their expression in movement would be. They bring different styles of writing – academic, poetic, descriptive, imaginal, and historical – from different points of view,

1 Instead of teachers, Prapto has created over time a list of around 90 'dialoguers' who have his permission to share practice within the tradition of Amerta Movement.

and different cultural, professional, and familial backgrounds. The book is, therefore, as unique and unusual as the practice itself. Each of the chapters shares the potency that comes from writing out of lived experience, rather than writing *about* something with distance and detachment. The common ground in which the chapters are rooted is the search for something of the truth of what has seeped into our lives from the experience of working with Prapto.

The writers, for many of whom English is not their first language, have each found their own way to put their experience into words. While we have aided the translation of complex ideas into English, we have not necessarily 'corrected' all turns of phrase, so that the flavour of individual voices can remain intact.

Reading 'Embodied Lives'

As editors, we were presented with the creative challenge of weaving the disparate threads together and finding organizing themes and categories. As you can see from the image on the next page, it was difficult to define a single category for each chapter. Rather than represent the material in a list, we have sought to express the constellations and gatherings that occurred around themes in the authors' writings. The image attempts to demonstrate the overlapping and interactive nature of the chapters, their movement, expressed as a web.

We have recognized several main areas of application – the art of teaching, the art of art, the art of life, the art of work, the art of healing, the art of the unknown, and movement itself. The various themes and ideas in the book are both epigenetic[2] and mutually informing; thus, all the different fields enrich our understanding altogether. In the web, we were trying to embody the interrelatedness of the material and tones of the chapters. Movement is placed in the center to communicate its primacy within and through all the arts. The connections come both from the authors themselves, as well as from the perspectives of the editors.

We decided to allow our final arrangement of the chapters to remain fluid, in motion, as it were, as long as we could. We chose a presentation for the book order that is not arranged by category.

2 In any *epigenetic* process, as seen in embryology or learning, growth and understanding comes through the foundations of one element informing the next. And at the same time, each field of understanding is reciprocally illuminating in relation with the others. This is beautifully described in Maturana Romesin, H. & Verden-Zoller, G., (2008) *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*. Imprint Academic.

Instead, we opted to draw on some of the interesting links and juxtapositions between disparate fields in arranging the chapters, creating dynamic counterpoints rather than similarities. In this looser way of weaving the threads from chapter to chapter, we hope to allow space for the movement of your own creative thinking, and to highlight the richness of the common field of practice.

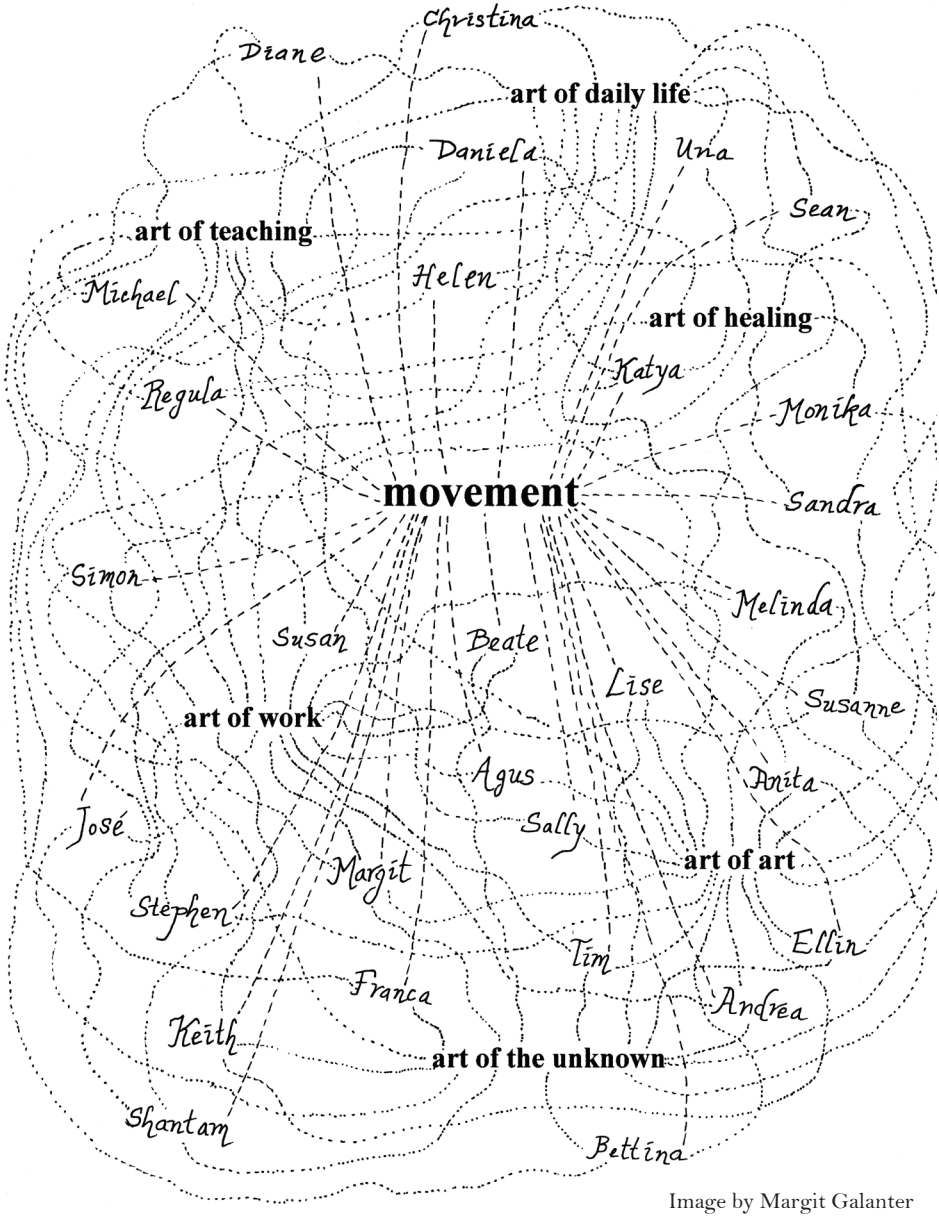

Image by Margit Galanter

Here are some glimpses of these threads: **Beate Stühm** writes from her moment-to-moment experience of moving, allowing us to enter the immediacy of the practice with her. **Keith Miller** takes us on a journey through a weave of movement and archeology. **Christina Stelzer** reflects on how her early studies and longtime experiences in Java gave her a unique perspective on the culture there. **Monika Förste**r describes "mind as an ally", and "giving awareness without creating stagnation" amongst other practices as she writes about Tibetan Buddhism and Amerta.

Steve Hopkins describes his embodied film practice, and the experience of a 3m (movement, meditation and movie) group. He situates this approach within a broader reflection on the art of filmmaking. **José Mulder van de Graaf** writes about how his movement practice bridged communication between humans and an animal, and how research in science supports his views. **Sandra Reeve** reveals the four Borobudur mudras in her daily life ritual and speaks about guiding through movement. **Bettina Mainz** writes from the point of view of a child of 1980s' Germany, and how her unconscious cultural attitudes toward life were made conscious through work with Prapto.

Daniela Coronelli chooses the theme of resonance to describe Amerta's influence in her work as a teacher and healing practitioner in traditions of the movement arts. **Shantam Zohar** writes a poignant story about a crucial relationship between artistic flowering, channeling, and *semadi* (meditation). **Margit Galanter** coins a stimulating term, the 'presencing dial', to describe how we modulate qualities of appearance and experience. **Sally Dean** describes her ongoing research, in teaching and performing, into 'somatic costumes'. **Lise Lavelle** writes about a particular performance she made in Java, and how crystallization is an art form in its own right.

Susanne Tümpel describes her fascinating movement therapy work in a psychosomatic hospital in former East Germany, and relates it to Prapto's ideas of *organism* and *organization*. **Agus Bimo** brings us 'Mantra Gerak' (Movement Mantra) from Java, describing the origins of Javanese mantra, how his practice was influenced by Amerta and its current applications. **Tim Jones**'s chapter describes the 'musical portal', the relationship between movement and sound. He describes a workshop exploring that interface, called *Music*

Garden Chatting. **Franca Fubini** describes the process of bringing Amerta Movement into the practice of Social Dreaming in her work with groups; she refers to Prapto's ideas of *Dreamworld* and *Realityworld*.

Una Nicholson writes about the way Amerta has informed her approach to the complexities of family life. **Katya Bloom** describes her experience "conferring with infants" in a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, as she explores the roots of dialogue before words. **Regula Nell** speaks of how her work with children is informed by two phrases Prapto said to her years ago in Java. **Sean Williams**, a developmental specialist, also works with children, mostly on the autism spectrum. He describes how his intention has changed dramatically through working with Prapto.

Susan Bauer writes about the long-lasting effects of Prapto's idea of *finding your position* and its relation to her practice 'Moving-from-Within'. **Helen Poynor** writes about Prapto's practice of *Body Body*, which has continued to inform her work as a teacher, performer and practitioner of movement. **Michael Dick** describes the qualities he derived from Amerta and which he applies to his work with actors, and offers a practice session as a case study example. **Simon Slidders** takes us into the realm of the law, and describes principles from Amerta that have guided his mindful work at the Royal Courts of Justice in London.

Andrea Morein illustrates how the practice and her experience with mindfulness training have informed her work as a visual artist. **Anita Lüdke** inventively illustrates how Amerta initially influenced her way of teaching students of architecture about the experience of space and now informs her daily life. **Melinda Buckwalter** describes a personal journey through time with Prapto, to find herself everchanging yet always right here. **Ellin Krinsly** describes her engaged performance work in many cultures, and how Prapto helped her locate a sense of home on the road. **Diane Butler** also describes her varied inter-culture work, and points toward its development in the future through the International Foundation for Dharma Nature Time.

Collectively these pieces may be seen as a constellation of happenings at particular places and moments. Though writing about movement fixes it in time, for all the writers, the ongoing influence of Amerta Movement inevitably means discovery, change, and growth.

Touched by Amerta

As editors, we have brought multiple perspectives, inspired both by our studies in Amerta Movement and by sources and approaches in our respective practices; these kinds of resources affected how the editing and shaping of the book unfolded. For example, Sandra brings an understanding of systems and constellations through her research with the ecological body; Margit is influenced by fascinations with feltedness and the embodiment of language; and Katya brings a longstanding interest in free association.

As readers you will inevitably approach the book with your own questions, arising from your own personal or professional background. You may find particular chapters closer to your own starting points, but we encourage you to look for inspiration and insight from all the chapters. Like walking around a garden, we recommend that you allow yourself to be surprised by the unexpected, perhaps finding your own route through the book.

We hope *Embodied Lives* will be of interest not only to those who are already familiar with Prapto's work, but to all who are interested in the value of an embodied approach to life and work. Current thinking about the brain and body point to the crucial importance of nonverbal, embodied perception and communication, and Amerta Movement offers an important path toward growth in this broad terrain.

To state the obvious, movement is a nonverbal and a three-dimensional experience, and any translation from that lived experience to the written word does not altogether represent this fullness. A book is limited by the parameters of its form, and yet, these limitations offer their own kind of liveness, so the process of writing and the composition of these elements onto the page have created a new evolution of Amerta Movement. We hope that the material itself can provide readers with a multi-dimensional, whole-bodied reading experience, and that it provides a new forum for translating and sharing the richness of the practice.

Visit **www.triarchypress.net/embodiedlives** *for further resources related to the book, including information about each author, additional images and information on how you can contribute your thoughts and experiences in an ongoing dialogue.*

Also Available from Triarchy Press

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